

Your first Lymphoedema appointment

Information for patients



You have been referred to the Leeds Lymphoedema Service. This leaflet aims to give you information about swelling that may help you while you wait for your first lymphoedema appointment.

This leaflet explains some ways you can help yourself, further information will be given to you when you attend the clinic.

Swelling of a limb or part of the body can develop when the lymph system is unable to drain fluid away from the tissues. The lymph system is made up of vessels rather like the blood circulation and these vessels contain fluid called lymph. Swelling can happen if the skin and tissues underneath have been damaged. It may also be a problem after surgery or medical treatment. Sometimes there is no apparent reason for the swelling and it can develop at any age - although leg swelling is more of a problem in people over 65 years.

What can happen

Swelling may be present in one or more limbs or in another part of the body. The swollen part often feels uncomfortable and may be painful. The size of the swelling may change and is often worse at the end of the day. Clothes may feel tight and not fit properly. Your skin may feel stretched and you may notice strange sensations in that part of your body.

Ways to ease the swelling

Gentle and regular exercise will help the body to move the fluid away from the swollen area.

Here are some ways that you can help yourself:

- if your swelling is in your arm or leg try to use the limb normally as muscle movement helps the lymph system to work and prevents the joints from becoming stiff;
- avoid using the swollen arm to carry heavy bags;
- avoid activities that are beyond your usual level of fitness until you have had a chance to discuss these at your appointment.

Looking after your skin to prevent infection

The lymph system forms part of the body's defence against infection. When it is not functioning correctly there is an increased risk of a skin infection (cellulitis - pronounced sell-you-lite-us). This problem causes an increase in the swelling.

If you develop cellulitis, the skin becomes swollen, hot, red and tender or you may develop a rash. You may also develop a temperature or feel like you have 'flu'-like symptoms. If you think that you are starting with a skin infection you need to commence a course of antibiotics as soon as possible and may need to make an urgent appointment with your doctor.

It is very important to keep your skin in good condition as any injury or break in the skin can cause a skin infection. Apply non-perfumed moisturising cream every day.

Ways to look after your skin

- Carry out regular examination of the skin on the part of your body that is at risk of swelling.
- Treat any scratches, cuts or insect bites promptly and watch them carefully to make sure they do not start to show signs of skin infection.

- Keep your skin well moisturised. Be careful if you use a perfumed cream as this may cause a reaction on your skin. You may already have been given advice by the hospital on which moisturising cream to use.
- Avoid having blood pressure or blood samples taken from, or injections given, to your affected limb.
- Use insect repellent if you are at risk of being bitten by insects.
- Cover your skin with clothes or gloves if you are at risk of being scratched - such as in the garden.
- Wear gloves when washing up or cleaning if you are at risk of arm swelling.
- If you are at risk of leg swelling, do not walk around bare-foot.
- Avoid heat or saunas which can increase the swelling.
- Take care when shaving around the affected area and use an electric razor around the swollen area.
- Avoid clothes or jewellery that leaves a mark on the skin. If this happens it can cause swelling as the tight clothes restrict the lymph flow.
- Avoid getting sunburnt. Use high factor sunscreen (at least factor 25) and keep in the shade when possible.
- Skin between toes or under a swollen breast can become moist and prone to fungal infections. Seek advice from your pharmacist or GP if you notice flaking skin, itching or irritation in skin folds and between toes.

The printing of this leaflet has been funded thanks to donations and gifts in Wills to Leeds Hospitals Charity
leedshospitalscharity.org.uk



© The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 4th edition (Ver 1)
 Developed by: Jacqueline Todd, Consultant Lymphoedema Therapist
 Reviewed by the Lymphoedema Specialist Team
 Produced by: Medical Illustration Services • MID code: M20220622_008/EP

LN000964
 Publication date
 06/2022
 Review date
 06/2024